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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DJIBOUTI 000360

SIPDIS

LONDON, PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/10/2015

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SUBJECT: ELECTION DAY IN DJIBOUTI: CALM, WITH SOME PROTESTS

Classified By: Pol/Econ Erinn C. Reed for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: With the help of PD, Consular and GSO Officers, the Pol/Econ section visited 11 polling stations throughout Djibouti City to gauge the mood on election day. Embassy Officers (EMBOFFs) divided into three teams, taking responsibility for different areas of the city. Consensus showed that polling sites were relatively calm. Only one major protest took place during the day. International news services reported use of force by police, including tear gas, in one late afternoon protest. EMBOFFs observed only a few persons being turned away from the polls, mostly for lack of proper identification. Many of the polling stations observed were not strictly controlled and were disorganized in their directions to voters. There appeared to be a general lack of instruction to and information for voters. Election results were announced Saturday, April 9th. According to the Ministry of Interior, 78.9 percent of registered voters turned out and President Ismael Omar Guelleh, the sole candidate, received 100 percent of votes cast. Ministry of Interior noted approximately 5 percent of votes cast were null and void due to damaged ballots. End Summary.

#### MOOD IN THE CITY

2. (C) As is usual for Djibouti City on a Friday, the streets were empty. Few people were milling around and fewer shops were open. Closer to polling stations there was more activity in the streets with a steady trickle of voters heading to the polls. During the hours EMBOFFs were out and about in the morning, there were two gatherings in the streets. All protests observed were calm and orderly. The largest protest observed was in front of the opposition headquarters, which is in one of the poor neighborhoods of the city. This protest was reported as being between 200 and 500 people. EMBOFFs estimated by visual count that it was closer to 200-300 persons. News services reported that when police arrived to disperse the demonstration several protesters began throwing rocks and forced the police to fire tear gas into the crowd. Several other protests occurred in neighborhoods which habitually side with the opposition. EMBOFFs did not visit any polling stations outside the capital city and are not able to comment on the mood of the electorate in other areas.

#### POLLING STATIONS

3. (C) EMBOFFs visited 11 polling stations throughout the city the morning of election day. Polling stations selected were in both affluent areas and poor neighborhoods in very populous areas. Most polling stations were located in neighborhood schools with several bureaus per school. Registered voters were assigned to a specific polling station and within that station to a specific bureau by alphabetical segments. Each polling bureau had approximately 600-700 voters assigned to it. At the time of EMBOFFs' visits, approximately 10 to 20 percent of each bureau's list had voted. In all of the polling stations, security was provided by a number of uniformed police. At many stations the only police presence was at the gate to the school, where uniformed officers screened for identification and voter cards. However, two polling stations visited had much greater police presence. In the neighborhood of Arhiba, an area with strong Afar and opposition numbers, the school used for polling stations had two busses full of police in riot gear positioned directly outside the entrance. At Ecole de la Zone Portuaire Sud, the polling station for the affluent and typically diplomatic neighborhood, there were uniformed police stationed not only at the entrance to the school but two at each doorway to polling bureaus.

4. (C) In most polling stations visited, there were persons "stumping" for the candidate and wearing pro-Guelleh paraphernalia inside the voting compound. Several voting bureau officials were even dressed in the green Guelleh campaign shirts and hats. One team of Embassy Officers ran into the Minister of Agriculture inside the Ecole d'Arhiba polling station actively campaigning for Guelleh. Also observed at Ecole d'Arhiba was a line of Guelleh supporters dressed in campaign T-shirts, forming a virtual wall of green that voters had to push through inside the school compound to get to the voting bureaus.

5. (C) The voting procedure was very simple, but still posed problems for some individuals. Upon entering a voting office,

voters showed their national identity card and electoral card to a bureau official who would check the register and have voters sign or fingerprint next to their name. Voters could also pick up their electoral card at the voting office if they had not already, or they could show their "ordonnance" from the Ministry of the Interior, which allowed them to vote if they had not met the registration deadline. After identification and voter eligibility was established, voting officials handed the individual a small manila envelope and a green ballot (Note: Green is Guelleh's color chosen for this year's ballot. If there were other candidates, the system has been to have different colored ballots for each candidate. The voter would simply put the color of his choice in the envelope and discard the rest. In the 1993 election, there was apparently only one candidate and there was a ballot for the candidate and a white candidate for abstention votes. There were no blank ballots this election. End Note.). The voter then went into a small booth with plywood covering the top half of the sides and a black curtain covering three-quarters of the length in front. There was a shelf inside the booth, but nothing else. The voter then folded the ballot to put inside the envelope and took it outside to the clear ballot box to place it inside. Once the ballot was cast, voting officials marked the electoral card and placed the voter's finger in indelible purple ink. Some of the voting booths were poorly constructed and leaned to a considerable degree, leaving a clear view through the sides of the curtain. In one office visited, voting was closed for a period to allow reconstruction of the booth after it fell down completely. Another voting booth's legs were being propped up by rocks to keep it from falling.

16. (C) There were several problems observed by EMBOFFs during their visits to polling stations. None of the envelopes had seals, so once voters cast their ballots into the clear ballot box the open flap would reveal the green ballot inside. Additionally, voters were supposed to have three options: Casting a whole, green ballot for Guelleh; tearing the ballot in half or to pieces (thus nullifying the vote) and placing it in the envelope before casting it; or simply throwing the ballot away and putting an empty envelope in the box. However there were no trash cans in the voting booths and one could not hide the ballot in his or her hand because of the need to fingerprint with indelible ink. It would have been impossible for a person to throw away the green Guelleh ballot without everyone in the office knowing. Furthermore, if a person put an empty, unsealed envelope into the clear box, everyone would be able to see that person voted against Guelleh. Poloff asked one voting office president if officials explained to each voter the options for casting a vote. He responded they only explained to those that didn't already know. There were many people that EMBOFF observed that were confused about the process for casting ballots. One elderly man was observed going first into one side of the voting booth, then the other and finally coming out to hand his ballot directly to the office president saying "I didn't see anyone to give it to, so you have to take it." Another person was observed wandering about outside the voting office with their ballot not knowing where to go or what to do. Many Embassy FSNs commented that some registered voters were completely uninformed as to where they were supposed to go to vote. At one station, a man was observed going from one office to the next asking the officials "check your list, am I on it?"

#### COMMENT

17. (C) Comment: While EMBOFFs were only out during the morning, news reports indicate the situation continued to be about the same all day. Bureau hours were extended by one hour, allowing stations to close at 7pm rather than 6pm. Each team of Embassy officers reported that there were no real problems with them visiting polling stations. One team encountered a fairly high-level Djiboutian official, who commented "why should we let you visit the offices after the U.S. had decided the elections were not worth having observers come to?" EmbOff reported this comment perhaps was made in jest, because this official did not cause any trouble for them after making his opinion heard. Unsubstantiated rumors in town indicate that some voting offices were not very strict on verifying identity. Agence France Press reported allegations of vote-buying in the town of Arta, where residents were reportedly told anyone casting a ballot would receive 4 pounds of rice and a can of oil. Post has not heard anything to corroborate this story.

18. (C) Comment cont. Government news sources indicated turnout was 78.9 percent of registered voters. Opposition numbers claim 48 percent of registered voters came to the polls. Using the numbers cited by the government, if 198,800 people were registered to vote, approximately 156,853 actually voted. La Nation, the Government-run newspaper, reported April 11th that roughly 5 percent of the votes cast were nullified. If government estimates on nullified ballots are correct, then approximately 9,940 votes were null. It is

impossible to determine, due to the differing opinions offered by voting officials, whether this 5 percent of the electorate chose not to vote for Guelleh or merely did not understand what to do. Rumors also indicated the co-director of the opposition journal Realite was injured when jumping out a second-story window when fleeing from the police breaking up the protest.

19. (C) The week prior to elections, ConOff was told by an Embassy Djibouti LES that she had been denied the right to register to vote for this election. According to the LES, registration officials told her she was ineligible to register because she had spent extensive time in the U.S in the past. She told ConOff that many who had ties to Western countries were being denied voting and registration privileges, including all dual citizens. The voter registration official also reportedly told the LES that votes at Djiboutian embassies abroad would be disregarded. This LES also reported that she had been unofficially warned to not speak of her disenfranchisement. She was told there were "government informers everywhere" and she could get "in trouble" if she talked about it. Post has not heard other stories of such denials and cannot verify the allegations. However, the LES is a credible and trusted Embassy employee, whose word is respected by both her American and Djiboutian co-workers. Post notes there are no restrictions in the electoral law placed on dual nationals or citizens who have been outside Djibouti for long periods of time. La Nation reported that 2500 registered overseas voters cast ballots in Djiboutian Embassies abroad. Post has not been able to confirm whether these votes were counted or not.

19. (C) Comment cont. Post's major concern after watching the election first-hand is the lack of information and options given to voters. The fact that there was no blank ballot, or any real confidential way to vote is the most troubling observation of the day. Post would be more comfortable with the voting procedures had there been an option to place a "protest vote" that were clearly explained to voters at the poll. Post is also concerned that turnout of registered voters (approximately 157,000 voted out of 199,000 registered) translates into only roughly 40 percent of the country's total population (using the estimated population of 650,000), which does not give Guelleh a majority of the country's support. End Comment.  
RAGSDALE